



George Clapp Vaillant

## GEORGE CLAPP VAILLANT, 1901–1945

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IT IS probably impossible for the living to understand the act which terminated this very rich and promising career in mid-course. George Vaillant was no ordinary person and subject to no simple formula. Those who knew this man "went proudly friended." That his destiny held "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars" they mortally regret. They all agree, however, that he left the world a much richer place than he found it.

The man was outstanding as an anthropologist as well as many other things beside and it is as a scientist that he should first be considered. Concerning his development both as a scientist and humanist, it may be well to remember that prior to the turbulent 1920's his primary interests were artistic and literary, momentarily mixed with the militaristic, due to the tempo of those as well as later times. His literary lode stars, I am told, were then Thomas Hardy, Dostoevsky, and Henry James, and his earlier writings on Mayan and Mexican stratigraphy have at times puzzled his contemporaries, perhaps for that reason. They are factual to an almost unlimited extent but they are complex, for not only were the facts complex but his was a complex and searching mind. Gradually as one follows his work a clearer delineation appears. Throughout the later record, the facts and their temporal placing still come first but, more and more, his penetrating interpretations in humanistic terms become simplified in expression and easier to understand.

This significant progression reaches a climax in *Aztecs of Mexico* (1941),<sup>1</sup> a book which not only won for him popular acclaim but also the academic title he regarded most highly, that of "Honorary Professor" conferred on him in 1942 by the Museo Nacional de Antropología of Mexico. This work marks a culmination wherein the complexities of scientific archaeology, art evaluation, ethnology and history are all integrated by deep thought and fine writing into the dynamic story of a living people—their past, present and predictable future. Behind this, Vaillant's master work, lay a vast

stint of labor which we will touch on later. Before doing so, however, a word about the book. This was no flash of genius. No one, unless it be his wife, Susannah Beck Vaillant, to whom the book is dedicated and who played a large part here, as in his earlier scientific excavations and writings, knows how many times it was re-written. The present writer read two complete manuscript versions and suggested drastic revisions few of which were visible in the final rendition. Recently I have been told by several of his close scientific and literary friends that they did the same with similar results. All suggestions were considered but the book as it finally appeared was his and his alone. Facing the present moment it is good to know that it was so well received both in the United States and, more important to the author, in Mexico, where it was quickly made available in Spanish. The author was deeply touched and very pleased. It is difficult to reach the minds and hearts of one's own countrymen, but to do that and also to satisfy both the experts and general readers of a neighboring republic when one is analyzing their own rich and turbulent past is an unique and very real triumph. In his lifetime George Vaillant achieved this and he was thereby proud, humble and very grateful.

Vaillant's name will always be most closely associated with the Valley of Mexico and the detailed stratigraphic excavations he carried on there from 1928 to 1936. However, his work in the American field began with the study of an even greater civilization, that of the Mayan peoples of Yucatan and Guatemala. His doctoral thesis "The Chronological Significance of Maya Ceramics" (1927) laid an objective basis for all subsequent research in this field despite the fact that it has never been published. Fortunately the Carnegie Institution made nine copies available and these have been worn threadbare by many students involved in this field. Nothing is usually so dead as a buried thesis, but Vaillant's has proved an exception. I venture to predict that the future student who brings this work up to date, and gets it published, will thereby make his reputation. Vaillant also made a very significant contribution in the Maya field when, in 1932, he brought to-

<sup>1</sup> A complete bibliography of the published works of George C. Vaillant prepared by Gordon F. Ekholm will appear in *The American Anthropologist*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 1945.

gether and published the important results attained by Merwin and Hay at Holmul. Ignoring, for lack of space, other significant contributions in this field, we come to his highly stimulating "Chronology and Stratigraphy in the Maya Area" (*Maya Research*, vol. 2, 1935) wherein he attempts to correlate the results of "classical" Maya epigraphy and calendric dating with the ceramic sequences established by the "dirt" or stratigraphic archaeologist. The result is a series of five possible calendric and ceramic horizon correlations ranked in their apparent order of probability. He concludes with a plea for "more excavations producing factual evidence, that will serve to resolve the divergences now apparent in the two methods of approach. To the end, Vaillant believed that Maya civilization represented "the highest intellectual expression of American Indian culture" (*The Archaeological Matrix of Maya History*, El Colegio de México, 1940) but he early renounced any belief that this culture was either "basic" or utterly unique among the great civilizations of the New World. Trained in the classical school of American archaeology he nevertheless quickly saw that the Maya cultural tradition was merely one among many and he was soon searching both farther afield and deeper in time.

In 1928, shortly after he joined the staff of the American Museum of Natural History, this quest took him to the Valley of Mexico. Here over a period of eight years he accomplished his finest work. Stimulated and aided by such students as Alfred Tozzer, Clarence L. Hay and Manuel Gamio, Vaillant launched an intensive attack on the prehistory and early history of the Valley which involved numerous deep stratigraphic excavations such as Zacatenco, Ticoman, El Arbolillo, Gualupita and others. The basic monographs on these meticulous excavations were later followed by numerous well illustrated, interpretative articles published in *Natural History*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* and elsewhere. These in turn were finally incorporated with rich historical and ethnological materials into *Aztecs of Mexico*. Throughout this period of intensive field work, study and writing he received invaluable aid from his wife, a resident of Mexico City, whom he married in 1930. This was also a period of great activity on the part of Mexican archaeologists and the Vaillants worked in close personal and intellectual cooperation with Al-

fonso Caso, Eduardo Noguera, Jimenez Moreno, and other Mexican scientists and historians. The results of their combined labor and research are too well known to need more than brief mention. In 1928, when Vaillant began his work, Mexican prehistory was conceived as falling into three major periods, Archaic, Toltec, and Aztec. By 1936, these combined research programs, in which Vaillant played an outstanding role, had transmuted this older three-fold division into a rich and detailed developmental record of many cultures, culminating in that of the Aztec. Concerning the earliest known cultures of the Valley, Vaillant early (1928) coined the term "Middle Cultures" as being more truly descriptive than their former designation "Archaic." In his opinion the earliest formative, or truly "Archaic," cultures of Middle America still await discovery. Concerning later horizons, his paper, "Hidden History" (*Natural History*, 1933), laid the foundations for the elucidation of the Mexican period at Chichen Itza.

As previously indicated, the publication in 1941 of *Aztecs of Mexico* marked the final rich harvest of Vaillant's work in the great central valley. However, in 1940 appeared two small but highly significant papers which contain his final conclusions on the major stages in Middle American culture history. One of these "Patterns in Mexican Culture" appeared in *The Maya and their Neighbors*, a volume which was dedicated to Alfred M. Tozzer and edited by Vaillant and four other former students of Tozzer. In this article, Vaillant outlines six major stages in the transition of Middle American culture from hunting and gathering to the advanced Mexicanized pattern encountered by the Spanish. In *The Matrix of Maya History* he presents his final conclusions concerning the major sequences of the post-Archaic or horticultural horizons in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. He designates the earliest dated horizon as the "Tres Zapotes-La Venta Culture" thus accepting the disputed earliest Tres Zapotes dated monument as contemporary and valid. On this general level he also groups the earlier Maya manifestations at Uaxactun, the earlier manifestations at Monte Alban, the Playa de Los Muertos culture and the earlier Middle Cultures of the Valley of Mexico. From this early matrix, obviously non-Maya in many of its important constituents, he proceeds to discuss four later derived Mayan stages cul-

minating in the wide spread of Mixteca-Puebla influences just prior to the Conquest.

It has been stated that Vaillant was much more than a scientist. Among these many-sided talents his understanding of art, ancient and modern, and his flair for practical cultural relations were perhaps the most outstanding. His remarkable feeling for art styles was strikingly demonstrated by his very early recognition of the so-called "Olmeca" style and its probable great significance ("A Bearded Mystery," *Natural History*, 1931, and "A Pre-Columbian Jade," *Natural History*, 1932). Since that time the series of amazing discoveries made by Matthew W. Stirling have amply verified Vaillant's predictions concerning the time range and importance of this "Olmeca" or Tres Zapotes-La Venta culture in southern Vera Cruz and Chiapas. This flair for art appreciation and presentation is represented in a series of beautifully illustrated articles on the art of the Aztec, Maya and their neighbors of which "Artists and Craftsmen of Middle America" 1935, and "Masterpieces of Primitive Sculpture," 1939 are but two examples among many. Concerning native art north of Mexico, he gathered together a splendid series of photographs which are included in his book *Indian Arts in North America*, 1939. His knowledge of colonial and ecclesiastical architecture in the Americas was equally extensive and his interest and energy in this regard unflagging. In 1939, the present writer, accompanying Vaillant on a tour of the Valley of Mexico, admitted defeat when, in addition to every notable prehistoric ruin, George also re-visited practically every colonial church. After the first twenty odd churches of all periods, the writer was quite content to view exteriors alone but Vaillant continued his thorough explorations of many more. His interest and knowledge likewise included both folk and more sophisticated modern art, and native craftsmen and famous artists in many countries were among his warmest friends.

It was this combination of humanistic and scientific competence with a warm and striking personality that made Vaillant a very important figure in the field of cultural relations. He believed that two-way cooperative effort between nations, particularly in the fields of science and the humanities, could be the keystone to international understanding. In Mexico his own work stands as a living demonstration of this belief. Later, in 1945, after two years of

successful service as the first United States Cultural Relations Officer in Peru, he summed up his fundamental precepts and beliefs concerning the many opportunities, as well as pitfalls inherent, in official efforts toward bettering cultural relations between nations in a thoughtful forthright article "Shadow and Substance in Cultural Relations" (*Scientific Monthly*, May 1945). Here he stresses the important fact that cultural relations involve personalities and actual accomplishments far more than they do propaganda and subsidies. He who would be a good cultural relations proponent should first be a producing scientist, author, artist, or business man in his own right, for if he has nothing better to offer other than official position, good will or propaganda, his influence will be nil. The record in Mexico and Peru, strongly indicates that George Vaillant more than lived up to the standards he suggests for others working in this his last, very important, but most intangible, field of accomplishment.

Thus, in a brief professional career of eighteen years, George Vaillant attained marked eminence as a productive scientist, museum administrator and successful proponent of closer cultural relations among the American and other nations. He was also a stimulating teacher at Yale, Columbia, New York and Pennsylvania universities. It is undoubtedly significant that while the first three of these major activities overlapped they were in general successive. Vaillant received thorough anthropological teaching at Harvard, was trained in archaeological field techniques by S. J. Guernsey, Earl Morris and more particularly, by A. V. Kidder at Pecos, and had first hand experience in 1923-24, both with Reisner in Egypt and at Carthage. Then followed more work with Kidder in the Southwest and, in 1926, excavations at Chichen Itzá for the Carnegie Institution. In 1927 he joined the staff of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the next year, aided particularly by Clarence L. Hay, he began his individual researches in the Valley of Mexico. This period, from 1928 to 1940, includes his most productive years as a creative scientist. Toward the close of his connection with the American Museum, administrative and teaching activities had begun to absorb his time. In 1941, when he accepted the Directorship of the University Museum in Philadelphia, he had obviously moved into the administrative rather than the research role. This same year he

played a leading part in launching and guiding the very successful Institute of Andean Research program of 1941-42 which included ten internationally cooperative archaeological expeditions in Latin America and the subsequent publication of their results. Vaillant's deep interest and knowledge concerning Latin America early drew him into the field of Pan-American cultural relations where he served on numerous committees of the research councils and the State Department. He was a logical choice as the first Cultural Relations Officer to be sent by the United States to Peru, and with his family, he spent the years of 1943-1944 in Lima. Here with his wife he played an important part in creating a closer understanding between intellectual and political groups and personalities not usually brought into close rapport. His success in this mission is further indicated by the fact that in 1945, after he had resumed his duties as Director of the University Museum, he was again called upon by the government to serve as chief representative of the Office of War Information in Madrid. At the time of his

death he was preparing to proceed on this mission accompanied by his family. His death came at the very time when he had passed from apprenticeship to full mastership as a scientist, a writer, an administrator and an expert in effective cultural relationship between nations.

Like Rupert Brook, George Vaillant "was winning in his ways. There was at first contact both bloom and charm, and most of all there was life. To use the word his friends describe him by, he was 'vivid.'" His death on May 13, 1945, leaves an empty space in the friendships of both those who had known him longest and those who had met him only the other day. To anthropological science, particularly in the American continents, as in the field of international relations his position was unique and he is widely and deeply mourned by many statesmen, artists, scientists, museum employees, field assistants and others who shared his varied labors and interests at home and abroad.

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